

# GETTING STARTED WITH GRAPHIC NOVELS IN SCHOOL LIBRARIES

BY ELIZABETH HAYNES



**G**raphic novels have become increasingly popular with young people over the last few years. At the same time, they have become much more prominent in popular culture in general. One only needs to look at the plethora of summer blockbuster movies based on comic superheroes or the increasing amount of shelf space devoted to graphic novels and manga in bookstores. But do graphic novels have a place in school libraries?

The answer is a resounding yes! But if you are not familiar with this combination word-and-picture art form, you may be wondering how to select titles that are appropriate for your library. Fortunately, assistance is not hard to find when it comes to graphic novels.

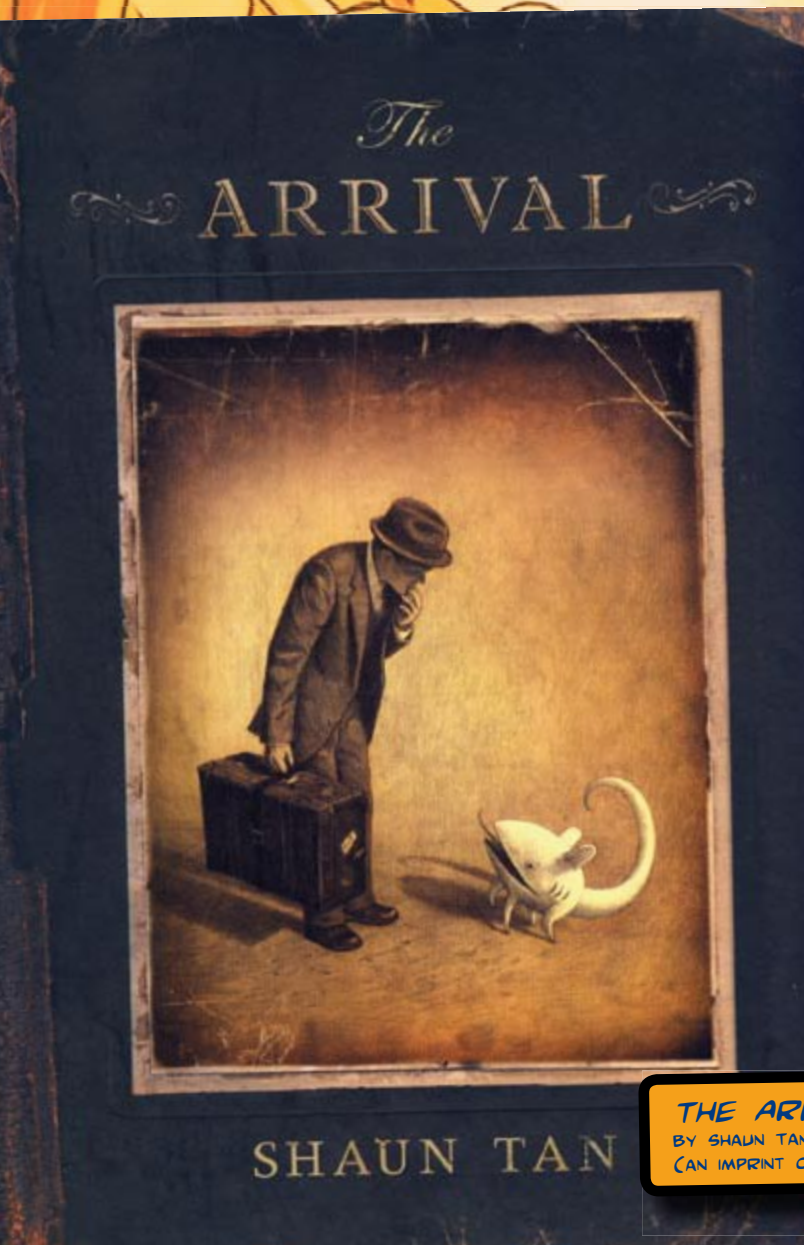
## BACKGROUND AND TERMINOLOGY

What is a graphic novel? How is it different from a comic book? Most of us are familiar with comic books as being short, flimsy stapled books that are little more than pamphlets and usually present one installment in an ongoing serial story. Graphic novels are longer. They usually contain a story with a beginning, middle, and end. One form of graphic novels collects complete story arcs that first appeared in comic book form, but that type is only a subset of the overall graphic novel universe. Graphic novels may be part of a series, but each volume typically contains a complete story. Graphic novels are published in sturdy trade paperback format or in hard cover.

It can't be overemphasized that the graphic novel is a **format**, just as picture books or chapter books are formats. Graphic novels encompass many different genres: humor, fantasy, science fiction, romance, mystery, horror, realism, and even nonfiction. (Nonfiction works in the graphic format tend to be grouped under the graphic novel format for convenience.) Superhero stories, although the first genre that often springs to mind when thinking about comic books/graphic novels, are far from being the only type of stories available in graphic format.

Most graphic novels are equally dependent on both pictures and text, although there are a few exceptions, such as *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan, that are wordless or near-wordless. One feature of graphic novels is multiple panels or pictures on most pages.

A subset of graphic novels that is of particular interest to many young people is manga, or Japanese comics. Several companies license these titles and publish them in English translations, including TokyoPop, Dark Horse, Viz, and DelRey. The majority of



### THE ARRIVAL

BY SHAUN TAN. ARTHUR A. LEVINE BOOKS  
(AN IMPRINT OF SCHOLASTIC). ©2006.

## BUT DO GRAPHIC NOVELS HAVE A PLACE IN SCHOOL LIBRARIES? THE ANSWER IS A RESOUNDING YES!

titles are published in the original format as printed in Japan, which means they read from back to front and right to left. While most manga (at least those published in English) are aimed at teenagers and adults, a few titles can be considered suitable for all ages or for elementary students. The vast majority of manga come in multiple volume series with continuing story lines, so if you start to purchase a series, you should be prepared to continue with it if popularity warrants.

Manga generally fall into either the shonen or shojo categories. Shonen manga frequently have young male protagonists who often engage in martial arts or other forms of fighting or are involved in action-oriented adventures and are designed to appeal to boys and young men. *Naruto* (published by Viz), currently the best-selling manga title in the U.S., falls into this category as it deals with a young ninja-in-training. Shojo manga may have both male and female protagonists and the emphasis is on relationships, although the storyline may be dramatic or mysterious. Another best-selling series, *Fruits Basket* (published by TokyoPop), is an example of shojo manga, which are meant to appeal to girls. These classifications are certainly not absolute as both genders read series that fall into both categories.

### SELECTION ISSUES

The basis for selection remains your own selection policy. Graphic novels should be selected based on the suitability of that title for the age group(s) served by your collection, as well as its curriculum and entertainment value. Pay careful attention to information furnished by reviewers and publishers regarding the age range for a given title. Excellent graphic novels are available for every age group served by school libraries, but many will not be suitable for elementary grades, while others will languish as too juvenile in a library serving the upper grades.

Compared to text-only books, graphic novels can be relatively costly as pictures are more expensive to prepare and print than text. Many graphic novels are available only in trade paperback binding. Libraries may be able to purchase these from rebinders such as PermaBound or send the books out to be rebound. If sending them out yourself, be sure that the gutter is wide enough for the book to be rebound without cutting off part of the pictures.

Selection problems that can arise with manga include the violence in some series and different cultural customs between Japan and the U.S. For example, Japanese tend to be more at ease with nudity than Americans. While most manga for teens do not show detailed nudity, non-detailed nudity may be present. Some series also indulge in what is known as fan-service, which includes exaggerated breasts, panty shots, and other images. U.S. publishers of manga put age ratings on their series. These ratings are not standard, but the company Web site can be consulted for interpretations of the publisher's ratings. A few manga titles are suitable for

elementary grades, but the vast majority of titles are intended for teenagers and frequently for older teens. Major bookstores carry many manga series, and librarians with access to these bookstores can often review the series for themselves. Manga are being reviewed with increasing frequency in library publications and other sources.

### REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATION SOURCES

With the increasing interest in graphic novels has come greater attention from reviewers, both tried-and-true print resources, and online review sources. Online sources range from print journal Web sites to listservs, blogs, and specialized Web sites. Michele Gorman, who has written extensively about graphic novels for young people, has a regular review column in *LIBRARY MEDIA CONNECTION*. Both *Booklist* and *School Library Journal* review graphic novels. The *School Library Journal* Web site also has reviews of graphic novels that are accessible even if you don't subscribe to the print journal. Librarians serving older teens can similarly find graphic novel reviews on the *Library Journal* Web site.

YALSA (a division of ALA) now publishes a "Great Graphic Novels for Teens" list each year ([www.ala.org/yalsa/ggnt](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/ggnt)) that can be consulted by those librarians serving teenagers. A good list of annotated Web site links for information and reviews can be found at [www.graphicnovels.broadart.com/links.htm](http://www.graphicnovels.broadart.com/links.htm). Other recommended lists can be found on various public library Web sites located through doing a search.

School librarians interested in discussions and advice about graphic novels can subscribe to the GNLIB-L (graphic novels in libraries) listserv. This listserv is hosted through Yahoo! groups and requires a Yahoo! account (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GNLIB-L/join>).

### WHAT TO DO WITH GRAPHIC NOVELS ONCE YOU'VE BOUGHT THEM

Perennial topics that come up in discussions about graphic novels in libraries are cataloging and shelving. Preprocessed graphic novels are likely to come with a Dewey classification of 741.5. Shelving your graphic novels in that location has the virtue of keeping them together, but they may not be easily found by students. And not all graphic novels necessarily belong in that classification. Graphic novels can be shelved in their own section, in a similar fashion to fiction or easy books. They can be cataloged as fiction (or easy) and shelved with those books. Many librarians would argue that the most effective method of getting these books into the hands of students is to put them in their own section, prominently displayed. You should decide what shelving and classification options will work best in your situation after considering the various options.

Subject headings are more easily dealt with as the latest edition of *Sears Subject Headings* has added a number of terms that are relevant for graphic novels.



## PERENNIAL TOPICS THAT COME UP IN DISCUSSIONS ABOUT GRAPHIC NOVELS IN LIBRARIES ARE CATALOGING AND SHELVING.

### LEARNING MORE ABOUT GRAPHIC NOVELS

One way to learn more about graphic novels is to turn to some of the experts on the subject. A number of books and journal articles are available, including the following titles.

Brenner, Robin. *Understanding Manga and Anime*. Libraries Unlimited, 2007. ISBN 13: 978-1591583325. Covers Japanese comics and animation from a library point of view. The emphasis is on manga.

Gorman, Michele. *Getting Graphic! Comics for Kids*. Linworth, 2008. ISBN 13: 978-1586833275. Lists graphic novels and manga suitable for elementary-aged students with extensive annotations.

Lyga, Allyson and Barry Lyga. *Graphic Novels in Your Media Center*. Libraries Unlimited, 2004. ISBN 13: 978-1591581420. Discusses many different issues regarding graphic novels in school libraries and includes lesson plans.

McLeod, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. HarperPerennial, 1994. ISBN 13: 978-0060976255. A classic title that introduces the reader to the art and design concepts used in the comic format, and shows the kinds of literacies that are involved in interacting with this combination of text and art.

Graphic novels are a great way to promote reading and provide enjoyment for your students. If you don't already have graphic novels in your collection, start by buying a few titles and see what happens. I believe you'll be very pleased with the results! 🌈

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